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Dr. K Indira

Assistant Professor on contract,
V.T. Bhattathirippad College,
Mannampatta, Kerala, India

Vedic social life: Traces from hymns of visvamitra

Dr. K Indira

Introduction

In the third Mandala of Rig Veda some social aspects are also found reflected. Some hymns in the Atharva Veda of Visvamitra are to remove disease, exorcism, agriculture etc. These hymns are expressing the social life in the Vedic age. Some notable points found in these hymns include matters connected to the following aspects 1. Status of Women 2. Cure of Disease and Exorcism 3. Agriculture.

Status of Women

In the Vedic age the position of woman in the house – hold is clear from the Vedic Mantras. The wife was the mistress of the household. The position of the wife in relation to her husband was also high in the Vedic age. The wife is emphatically called the mistress (Grihapatni) of her husband's home ^[1] She participate in the Soma – sacrifice with her husband. In the Visvamitra Mantras these types of praises of women are found. Some Mantras are as described bellow. Visvamitra says about the man and wife, and identity of house and housewife in the following Mantras:

A man's wife, Maghavan, is his dwelling: verily she is his place of birth: thither let your horses, harnessed (to your car), convey you: we prepare the soma juice at the fit season: may Agni come as our messenger before me ^[2]. These aspects are also seen by the latter Smriti texts ^[3].

Visvamitra praises the divinities with their wives for the sacrifice. The Mantras are as follows: 'With all these in one chariot, Agni, or in many (chariots), come to our presence, for your horses are able: bring the three and thirty divinities with their wives, for the sake of (the sacrificial) food, and exhilarate them (all with the soma libation)' ^[4]. In this Mantra the equal importance of the gods and their wives in the sacrifice is clear. Then:

The great and adorable Agni is firm seated on his spacious throne between heaven and earth; and the powerful fellow- brides (of the sun), the imperishable uninjurable (heaven and earth) are the two milk- yielding cows of the wide- extending (Agni) ^[5].

He cherishes the embryo of the parent (firmament) and of the generator (of the world): he alone consumes many flourishing (plants); the associated brides (of the sun, Heaven and Earth), who are kind to man, are both of kin to that pure show ever (of blessing); do your, Agni, ever preserve them. These Mantras say that the wives of sun are Heaven and Earth ^[6].

Then the position of household wife:

'When you have drunk the Soma, then, Indira, go home: an auspicious life (abides) pleasantly in your dwelling: in either (case) there is the standing in your car or liberating the steeds for provender' ^[7]. In this Mantra soma and wife are dealt with as of in equal status. i.e. in what manner soma is in the sacrifice in that way wife is in the house. In the Visvamitra Mantras the custom of that period the father's properties does not go to the daughter is found.

¹ RigVeda, X.85.26.

² Ibid., III.53.4.

³ Manusmriti, Ch.9.

⁴ RigVeda, III. 6.9.

⁵ Ibid., III.6.4.

⁶ Ibid., III.1.10.

⁷ Ibid., III.53. 6.

Correspondence

Dr. K Indira

Assistant Professor on contract,
V.T. Bhattathirippad College,
Mannampatta, Kerala, India

Even though she is Grihapatni, the controller of house hold, companion in Vedic rites, she is not equal to a son in Vedic Society.

Cure of Disease and Exorcism

Important Suktas of Visvamitra in the AtharvaVeda is of the cure of disease VI.44 and exorcism V. 15-16. Matter discussed in the hymn is the cure of disease. The important Mantras are the following:

The heaven hath stood, the earth hath stood; this entire living world hath stood; the trees have stood; sleeping erect; may this disease of thine stand^[8]. In this Sukta trees, heaven earth, etc. might have been used for establishing the 'Sthiratva' or long lasting nature of wellbeing. Diseases are never to come back after the usage of the Aushadi which is praised.

Then, 'what hundred remedies are thine, and (what) thousand, assembled (with them thou art) the most excellent remedy for flux, the best effacer of disease^[9].

This Mantra is used for praises of Aushadi. The Aushadi has the strength which makes it the foremost remedy among many. Praising its strength may be to increase the self confidence of patient. This medicine help to recover of the disease, this belief of the sick person is important thing in the treatment. So Visvamitra act as a good physician.

The next Mantra is as follows:

Rudra's urine art thou, the navel of the immortal (Amrita); Vishanaka (horny) by name art thou, arisen from the root of the fathers, an effacer of the Vatikrithita. Vishanaka, Vishanika and Vishana, its other names are Karkasringi and Meshasringi^[10].

This Mantra is used for praising the greatness of Vishanaka. It is a medicine which is used even in present day. It is metaphorically pictured as the Rudra's urine, navel of Amrita etc. This will be for highlighting to the strength, quality etc of Vishanaka.

Some Suktas are mentioned for the exorcism to a plant. The Mantra is as follows:

'Both one of me and ten of me (are) the exorcisers (Apavaktar), O herb; thou, born of right (Rta), thou rich in right, mayest thou, honeyed (Madhula), make honey for me^[11]. In the next mantras the number of exorcises are increased in to thousand. But he wanted only one thing, 'make honey for me^[12].

This Mantra does not give the name of the plant. Here the word Madhu meaning honey may be signifying the essence of plant. It is prayed to give back the life of patients or to help to recover from the disease, etc. As exorcises may be in peril, so the disease also. Hence the mantra may be indicating the all curing nature of the Aushadi. If the other meaning 'speakers of scandal' is intended then rescue from all these persons is prayed. The herb is praised as the one and only solution in the situation.

In another Sukta also exorcism is discussed. The Mantra is as follows:

'If thou, art sole chief, let go; sapless art thou^[13]. Next Mantra contain, the number of chief is increased into eleven^[14].

⁸ AtharvaVeda, VI. 44.1.

⁹ Whitney's Tr. of AtharvaVeda, VI. 4.1.

¹⁰ AtharvaVeda, VI. 44.3.

¹¹ Ibid., V. 15.1.

¹² Ibid., V.15.2-11.

¹³ Ibid., V. 16.1.

¹⁴ Ibid., V. 16.2-11.

Agriculture

AtharvaVeda gives a detailed description of the modes and implements of agriculture. Visvamitra narrates that plugging of the lands and forming rows in the soil as the fundamental process in cultivating the farm. 'Sita' furrowed land was invoked, in the beginning to bestow abundance of grains. The Mantras is as follows:

The poets (Kavi) harness the plows (Sira), they extend severally the yokes- they the wise ones (Dhira), with desire of favor toward the gods^[15]. In the next Mantra sage Visvamitra argues to scatter the seed in the prepared seed-bed. That is, 'harness ye the plows, extend the yokes; scatter (Vap) the seed here in the prepared womb; may be bunch of Viraj be burdened for us; may the sickles draw in (a-yu) the ripe (grain) yet closer^[16]. The use of Pavira perhaps suggests irrigational purpose. The Mantra is as follows:

Let the plow (Langala), lance- pointed, well- lying, with well-smoothed handle, turn up (ud-vap) cow, sheep, an on-going chariot- frame and plump wench^[17]. The next Mantra is, 'let Indra hold down the furrow; let Pushan defend it; let it; rich in milk, yield to us each further summer^[18]. The fathers ride on the plough. The 'Sita' is invoked to help them and to drive the plough easily:

'Successfully (Sunam) let the plowmen follow the beasts of draft; O Sunasira, do ye (two), dripping with oblation, make the herbs rich in berries for this man^[19]. Bullocks, farmer, plough and whip should be in a good condition so that ploughing may be smooth and easy:

Successfully let the draft- animals, successful the men, successfully let the plow (Langala) plow; successfully let the straps be bound; successfully do thou brandish the goad^[20]. The word Ushtra also is mentioned in this Mantra. Sita is the god of agriculture:

With ghee, with honey (Madhu) the furrow all anointed, approved (Anuman) by all the gods, by the Maruts; do thou, O furrow, turn hither unto as with milk, rich in refreshment, swelling with fullness of ghee^[21].

Some Mantras are pronounced with marking of cattle's ear. These Mantras give the prosperity of cattle's by the special marking of its ear. The Mantras is as follows:

'May Vayu collect them; let Tvashtar stay fast in order to (their) prosperity; may Indra bless them; let Rudra take care for (their) numbers'^[22]. The next Mantra is, 'with the red knife (Svadhiti), make thou a pair (Mithuna) on (their) two ear; the Asvins have made the mark; be that numerous by progeny'^[23]. Another is, 'as the gods and Asuras made (it), as human beings also, so, Asvins, make ye the mark, in order to thousand old prosperity'^[24].

In some Mantras the crease of barley is mentioned. Some Mantras are addressed, at the time of the showing of the seed. Sage Visvamitra prays for the increase of his barley grain heap to grow inexhaustible like the sea. The Mantra is as follows:

'Rise up (ut-sri), become abundant (Bahu) with thine own greatness, O barley; rain (MRI) all receptacles; let not the bolt

¹⁵ Ibid., III. 17.1.

¹⁶ Whitney's Tr. of AtharvaVeda, III.17.2.

¹⁷ AtharvaVeda, III.17.3.

¹⁸ Whitney 's Tr. of AtharvaVeda, III.17.4.

¹⁹ AtharvaVeda, III.17.5.

²⁰ Ibid., III. 17.6.

²¹ Ibid., III.17.9.

²² Ibid., VI.141.1.

²³ Whitney's Tr. of AtharvaVeda, VI.141.2.

²⁴ Ibid., VI.141.3.

from heaven smite thee' [25], The next Mantra is, 'where we appeal unto thee, the divine barley that listens, there (tat) rise up, like the sky; be unexhausted, like the ocean' [26]. Other is, 'unexhausted be thine attendants (Upasad), unexhausted thy heaps; thy bestowers be unexhausted; thy eaters be unexhausted' [27].

In these Mantras the work progress of the farming is pictured. The cultivation, tools, animals used, farmers, growth of plants etc. are very clearly described by Visvamitra. He observes the minute details of the processes of agriculture. So this illustrates his knowledge as a good farmer.

According to the scholars who believe in the historical interpretation of the Vedas, the name of Visvamitra is connected with charms and spells. But they have all been for good purposes. That is, the diseases were removed and food becomes abundant. So the sage is called friend of the world [28].

These hymns have connection to the day life of common people. Some of them are for successful agriculture. Some others are for protection of cattle. Some are for curing disease. These medicines are also used in the present age. These hymns are considered by some scholars as charms and spells. But it's not the case as seen in Atharvaveda Mantras. The studies of these Mantras, provides one with a feeling that they are for the well being and are of common purposes. In these Suktas of Visvamitra gets the roles of physician, farmer etc. In these Suktas connected to agriculture one can observe another aspect also. These might have been used as the songs sung to get relief from the hardness of job. They give many good information of farming. In the present day these information have relevance. They give the picture of real agriculture which is not familiar in modern times.

In the Vedic sources the Visvamitra Nadisamvada Sukta is a very important in the historical and social evaluation. Visvamitra gave an important position to women in his Mantras. He compares the status of the Soma in the sacrifice as like that of the women in the home. The Visvamitra mantras in the Atharvaveda give importance for social life. They are directly connected to the society. So these detailed descriptions given by Visvamitra attained him prominence among the sages of Atharvaveda. The legend of Sunassepa is an example of helping mentality of Visvamitra. He appears here as a friend of society who questions the improper deeds of king and his Purohita. The stream of thinkers who raise questions against the existing and established customs is represented here by Visvamitra. We find Visvamitra in many such occasions in legends and myths. These socially and historically connections of Visvamitra goes to the mythological characterization of Visvamitra.

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²⁵ AtharvaVeda, VI.142.1.

²⁶ Whitney's Tr.of AV, VI.142.2.

²⁷ Ibid., VI.142.3.

²⁸ Rigvedic Legends, Prem chand Shridhar, Kalinga Publishers, Delhi, 2001, pg.131-132.

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